

# An Appreciation of Nineteenth-century Artworks and a Review of the Historical Context

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**Abstract:** During the 19th century, the flourishing course of this period motivates the innovation and origination of various art movements and styles that are spread quickly because of the increased convenience of transportation (Nochlin 1). Although a part of painting styles lived only for a short period or limited within small districts, others were widely spread and had profound influences on artworks of Modernity (Nochlin 7). Regardless of how long these paintings have lasted or how wide they have affected, these paintings reflect this specific era's societal, political, and cultural changes. This final project picks one figurative painting from each of these five styles as case studies that support analysing similarities and differences of formal elements and subject matter presented by these painting styles of the period, showcasing the significant historical context embodied by these artworks. These picked paintings are Ophelia, Bonaparte Visiting the Plague Victims of Jaffa, Rue Transnonain, Camille Monet and a Child in the Artist's Garden at Argenteuil, and Raft of the Medusa. The following of this essay first analyses similarities and differences of formal elements presented by these five paintings. Then, comparing historical contexts of these paintings.

## 1. Research Background

During the 19th century, Europe was experiencing huge breakthroughs in sciences and technologies, which instigated the significant development of transportation, industry, and economy. The flourishing course of this period motivates the innovation and origination of various art movements and styles that are spread quickly because of the increased convenience of transportation (Nochlin 1). Acting as one art category, painting has been well developed and revolutionized dramatically. Although a part of painting styles lived only for a short period or limited within small districts, others were widely spread and had profound influences on artworks of Modernity (Nochlin 7). Regardless of how long these paintings have lasted or how wide they have affected, these paintings reflect this specific era's societal, political, and cultural changes.

Among these painting types, five representations are the Pre-Raphaelites, Orientalism, French Realism, Impressionism, and Romanticism. This final project picks one figurative painting from each of these five styles as case studies that support analysing similarities and differences of formal elements and subject matter presented by these painting styles of the period, showcasing the significant historical context embodied by these artworks. These picked paintings are Ophelia, Bonaparte Visiting the Plague Victims of Jaffa, Rue Transnonain, Camille Monet and a Child in the Artist's Garden at Argenteuil, and Raft of the Medusa. The following of this essay first analyses similarities and differences of formal elements presented by these five paintings. Then, comparing historical contexts of these paintings.

## 2. Analysis of Different Forms of Expression

## 2.1. Color Analyze

As for, these five artworks share similar and different features in various aspects, including colour, line, and space, and light and shadow. Firstly, excluding Rue Transnonain, the rest four paintings try to use a wide variety of colours to narrate scenarios and express emotions. To be specific, the colour use of Rue Transnonain is monotonous, which merely adopts white and black to interpret the entire work.

In contrast, the other four paintings show viewers with memorable colour palettes. In *The Raft of the Medusa*, Géricault uses a lot of low saturated and darker colours to paint this horrific scene, reflecting how hopeless and depressed these characters are on the raft. Then, the colour palette of *Camille Monet and a Child in the Artist's Garden at Argenteuil* is highly saturated, which shows a lush, vibrant, and beautiful environment. Monet uses various warm colours, such as pink, orange, and red, to figure flowers behind the figures and employs different shades of green for the stems, leaves, and grass.

Similarly, in *Napoleon at the Pesthouse of Jaffa*, Gros uses highly saturated and warm colours when depicting people within the aperture, while most locals wear clothes in dark and cold colours. The contrast raised between light and dark colours highlights the glory of Napoleon as ruler and portrays the poverty and threat of disease of the locals in Jaffa. In *Ophelia*, Millais adopts a dark palette and various cold colours to describe plants around the character to express the heroine's tragedy. For example, Ophelia's skin is nearly pale, recounting her lifelessness. Ophelia's waist is black to show her sinking.

## 2.2. Line and Space Analyze

Secondly, *Camille Monet and a Child in the Artist's Garden at Argenteuil* highlights itself by revolutionizing line and space, while the other four paintings obey academicism. Instead of using lines, Monet creatively uses a great deal of impressionistic techniques in *Camille Monet and a Child in the Artist's Garden at Argenteuil*, with vigorous, short, lively, and naturalistic brushstrokes that add a sense of dimension to the whole painting.

Simultaneously, Monet creates the illusion of space on a two-dimensional surface rather than three dimensions, unlike other paintings. Compared with others, *Rue Transnonain* takes advantage of the line using. Daumier skilfully uses the combination of dense, sparse, thick and thin lines to present such a shocking situation caused by war. Millais uses thick lines to figure plants and stones around *Ophelia*, which underlines the delicate lines used for drawing her face and body. This also motives people to be attracted by her facial expression and exquisite lace dress. Her eyes and mouth are slightly open, and her sightline is frozen to the sky. Millais uses clear and thick lines to show *Ophelia's* hands that spread helplessly on either side of her body. This suggests that she is powerless to resist the reality of what is happening, and that compromise is her only choice.

Gros employs thick and thin lines to figure the oriental elements of *Napoleon at the Pesthouse of Jaffa*. For example, Gros applies thick lines to draw Geometric forms, such as buildings upper part of the scene, circular arches, conical tower tops, cylindrical columns, and rectangular roof decoration, to reflect the richness of the oriental or exotic elements. As the view progresses from far to near, the lines change from rough to detailed. Similarly, in order to create a three-dimensional image, Géricault uses thick lines to figure out shapes and objects. For example, he uses dark and thick lines to paint clouds, waves, geometric rafts, sails and ropes for revealing that the power of nature is too great for tiny humans to resist or reverse. This also indicates the tragedy of these people and the mercilessness of the nobility who give them up.

What should be mentioned is that, excluding *Camille Monet and a Child in the Artist's Garden at Argenteuil*, the other four paintings demonstrate clear three-dimensional spaces adopting horizontal and vertical lines.

## 2.3. Use of Light and Shadow

Finally, *Bonaparte Visiting the Plague Victims of Jaffa*, *Rue Transnonain*, and *Raft of the Medusa* show extraordinary skills in using light and shadow, whereas *Ophelia* and *Camille Monet*

and a Child in the Artist's Garden at Argenteuil do not clearly show the adoption of light and shadow. Specifically, in Bonaparte Visiting the Plague Victims of Jaffa, a beam of light comes into the scene from the upper left and shines directly on the body of Napoleon in the centre of the stage, implying that he is the unique protagonist of the work. Street fights were not unusual in Paris since the city had long endured political repression enforced by the police and civil guard. The oppressive monarchy that had succeeded Napoleon's control had been destroyed by the Revolution of 1830, which served as the inspiration for Delacroix's picture Liberty Leading the People. Louis-Philippe, the new monarch, referred to himself as the King of France and was expected to be more liberal. Instead, he suppressed press freedom and public criticism like that his predecessors (McCoy 3). In June 1832, those who desired the liberties envisioned by the French Revolution of 1789 tried yet another uprising. In his work *Les Misérables*, author Victor Hugo remembered the uprising that left over 100 people dead on the streets of downtown Paris. What occurred on Rue Transnonain was distinctive in some way. However, locals, who are far away from Napoleon and situated around the margin lines surrounding the painting, are in darker corners and cannot be shined by the light. This reflects their difficult living conditions and low social status.

Daumier uses a strong contrast between light and shadow to express his terror of death caused by the war in Rue Transnonain. The man, who is lying in the centre of the picture, is the brightest spot in the whole picture. Extensive shadows around the edges of the image guide viewers' sight of the central man and his dead families, which engages the threat of death. In *Raft of the Medusa*, Géricault uses the contrast between light and dark to portray characters' facial expressions and muscularity, which reflects their fear and desperation in such despair. As we stand in front of the picture, we can see a raft made of leftover wood bobbing in the waves. The interwoven figures advancing up the canvas to the right, with their bodies extended together and their arms making a powerful diagonal sweep upward, initially catch the viewer's attention. A Black guy at the group's top waves a piece of red and white fabric in the direction of a small ship in the distance, as does a figure with a lighter complexion beneath him. The dead and dying are mixed with the live humans shown in this remarkable pyramidal composition as they all frantically seek assistance (McCoy 3). However, Ophelia and Camille Monet and a Child in the Artist's Garden at Argenteuil tend to use colours to narrate the painting scenarios rather than light and shadow.

#### **2.4. Analysis of Different Historical Backgrounds**

These five artworks also share similarities and differences in revealing historic issues of this period. *Bonaparte Visiting the Plague Victims of Jaffa*, *Rue Transnonain*, and *Raft of the Medusa* show the brutalities and tragedies brought by the ruling class, while *Ophelia* Camille Monet and *a Child in the Artist's Garden at Argenteuil* do not express the political context of that era.

*Rue Transnonain* commemorates the killing of innocent civilians by the National Guard in Paris during the mass riots of 1834 (The Metropolitan Museum of Art 1). Every member of the family has been killed with nightclothes, and they are lying in different positions on the floor. It seems to suggest that this atrocity came without warning. Daumier's lithograph reflects his anger at the atrocities committed by the National Guard and his regret at the hopelessness of the social situation. The home is no longer a sense of safety, and the bedroom has become a place of nightmares. *Bonaparte Visiting the Plague Victims of Jaffa* shows Napoleon's condolences to Jaffa's natives. Although this painting shows Napoleon cares about locals' disease, different dresses, health conditions, and mind states reveal the inequality between classes. For example, the uniforms worn by Napoleon and his French soldiers show significant differences with locals' robes or unclothed. Napoleon's eyes only directly touch the patient to his right, while the gaze of all those present is almost entirely on Napoleon. This reveals the noble and central position of a ruler. Napoleon was an expert at influencing the public's perception of him via art. When he fled Jaffa, he poisoned his soldiers who were succumbing to the illness and ordered the execution of the prisoners he could not afford to shelter or feed. Napoleon visited his men suffering from the Bubonic Plague in 1799 at a temporary hospital in Jaffa. By bravely touching one of the plague victims' wounds, Gros shows Napoleon seeking to quell the spreading dread of infection. Like previous neoclassical works like

David's *Death of Marat*, Gros mixes a modern theme with Christian symbolism. In this instance, Christ cures the ill. He also references the work of classical antiquity by placing Napoleon in the exact location as the old Greek sculpture known as the Apollo Belvedere. He gives Napoleon celestial characteristics while yet portraying him as a brave soldier this way. But unlike David, Gros concentrates on the dead and dying people in the painting's forefront and employs warm, sensuous hues. Later, in Delacroix's work *Liberty Leading the People*, we see the same strategy. The lowest part of the image is filled with bodies about to disappear under the sea. The upper half of a guy may be seen arching back to the left of the father and son duo, while his lower body is floating below. The artist, Delacroix's model for the dark-haired man lying face-down with his lower arm extended across a piece of wood, is situated to the right of the father and son. A pale body dressed in white lies next to him on his back with his head submerged in the ocean. His legs are entangled in the raft's wood. Strong contrasts between light and shade in the painting's murky amber and green tones serve as a reminder that this is ultimately an image of death. Additionally, a French soldier behind Napoleon is covering his mouth with a handkerchief, whose gestures and eyes show that he is disgusted and has no sympathy for the patients around him. Similarly, *The Raft of the Medusa* also demonstrates the inequality between different social classes and the mercilessness of nobilities. The canvas is a record of a tragedy caused by Medusa's shipwreck. When the *Medusa* was aground on a sandbar off the coast of West Africa (McCoy 6) and could not be repaired, the captain put the French governors, their families and other high-ranking passengers into the six lifeboats, while remaining 150 passengers, who are lower-ranking military men, colonists, and sailors of European and African descent, on the raft (McCoy 7). A pale body dressed in white lies next to him on his back with his head submerged in the ocean. His legs are entangled in the raft's wood. Strong contrasts between light and shade in the painting's murky amber and green tones serve as a reminder that this is ultimately an image of death. The large canvas and the meticulously planned arrangement built around two crossing pyramidal shapes that highlighted the unity of motion indicated that the piece was created following that tradition. Géricault initially learnt about the catastrophe via the Parisian media. The ship's doctor, Henri Savigny, and the engineer, Alexandre Corréard, were two survivors who later wrote books about their time on the raft. Both were interviewed by Géricault, who also worked with other survivors. The painter travelled to the French shore to see how ships manoeuvred on the ocean. The carpenter who had created the raft for the *Medusa* offered Géricault a tiny replica after he had studied blueprints for its design. To figure out what to show the viewers and exactly how to achieve it, Géricault started by sketching the bodies of the living and the dead. He then worked out the scene in watercolour and oil studies.

Undoubtedly, this raft is overcrowded. In order to survive, these people are pulling each other's hands up as they are crying out in desperation and praying for the possibility of survival. Many people at the bottom of the picture have been disabled or lost their lives. Only ten people ultimately survived (McCoy 3).

This canvas tells a brutal story of cannibalism, colonialism, murder, and hierarchical inequality (McCoy 8). However, *Ophelia* expresses the tragic fate of women caused by man's revenge, and *Camille Monet and a Child in the Artist's Garden at Argenteuil* is the origination of impressionism, which breaks traditional painting styles academicism. These two artworks pay no attention to discussing political and hierarchical issues.

### 3. Conclusion

In conclusion, the Pre-Raphaelites, Orientalism, French Realism, Impressionism, and Romanticism are five essential and representative painting styles of the 19th century. Correspondingly, *Ophelia*, *Bonaparte Visiting the Plague Victims of Jaffa*, *Rue Transnonain*, *Camille Monet and a Child in the Artist's Garden at Argenteuil*, and *Raft of the Medusa* are figurative paintings of these styles. These paintings affect the evolution of arts and remind people to pay attention to historical issues and avoid the assurance of similar tragedies.

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